

Return Of The... Kong

For as long as he has wanted to be a filmmaker, Peter Jackson has yearned to do a remake of *King Kong* that did justice to the original 1933 version. Now, in the wilds – and effects studios – of New Zealand, his dream is almost a reality...

WORDS IAN NATHAN

COURTNEY PLACE, WELLINGTON

December 1976. It's 8 o'clock on a sleepy Friday morning. A rush hour, 10 cars long, nudges along the winding city streets. People are making their way to work. Urban routines unfold like clockwork. Except for a lonely 14-year-old boy, his wire-rimmed spectacles barely making purchase on the bridge of his nose, standing outside the Kings Theatre cinema in search of a crowd.

"We lived 20 miles away, so I jumped on a train at seven in the morning thinking I was going to be first in line to get a good seat," the boy later recalls. The memory is so clear it could be yesterday, but 29 remarkable years have gone by since that day. "I got there and nobody was at the cinema, it was locked and empty."


What was wrong? Where was everybody? Surely they all knew what he so hungrily did? The brand new remake of *King Kong* was opening on this very day – in fact, the first matinee show was due to begin in only three hours. The boy was unsure. He didn't dare leave the cinema doors, he would lose his place in the nonexistent queue. Then, at five to 11, he strolled in and bought a ticket. There were just 10 people in the audience.

The boy had spent months reading about potential new versions of *King Kong* in *Famous Monsters Of Film* and *Starlog*; about the rivalry between separate Universal and Paramount projects. His hopes were pinned on the Universal one – they were talking up Jim Danforth's stop-motion dinosaurs, Sensurround sound and an authentic 1933 setting, whereas Dino De Laurentiis, producer of the Paramount version, was talking about a 40-foot robotic monkey that could climb buildings and stroll along Fifth Avenue. When Paramount and Dino won the race, the boy wasn't too perturbed. Kong was still coming, although he was already well aware that giant mechanical gorillas were a myth. It was Rick Baker in a monkey suit.

"I still kind of bought into the hype," he laughs. "I convinced myself there would be crowds and crowds of people. There weren't. And, like most people, I was disappointed by it."

It says something of the boy's devotion to this concept of an outsized simian ruling an island time forgot – something that had gripped his imagination five years earlier when he saw the 1933 version for the first time – that he went back to see the remake, a colossal flop, three times. >>





"Hmmm, they don't look like giant gorillas..." Our explorers uncover the lost world of Skull Island.

"As a 14-year-old I was just happy to see *King Kong*," he says. "I didn't like the modern-day setting and there were no dinosaurs, and I hated the fact the ending was all done at night-time. They were cheating. I wished it was stop-motion—that was my dream back then, to do a stop-motion *King Kong* with Harryhausen or Jim Danforth. That would be the ultimate."

Much has been written of how the 1933 version of *King Kong* inspired this boy to become a filmmaker. And what a filmmaker he became, winning Oscars, setting box-office records, creating a kingdom all his own on this island at the ends of the Earth. Now, finally, he has earned the chance to pay the greatest honour to Merian C. Cooper and Ernest P. Schoedsack, directors of that great black and white spectacle, by remaking their film. Set in 1933, of course. With CGI replacing stop-motion. And 30 different types of dinosaur. "The classic movie is always going to be the classic movie," he says reverently. "Ours is the remake of the classic movie."

Yet another inspiration, a persistent voice in the grown-up boy's head pushing him to greater and greater lengths, to a level of detail that will astound 14-year-olds of all ages and sexes, calls from that strange, empty day when that dreadful 1976 remake opened in New Zealand. If you want to know what drives the 44-year-old Peter

"THE CLASSIC MOVIE IS ALWAYS GOING TO BE THE CLASSIC MOVIE. OURS IS THE REMAKE." PETER JACKSON

Jackson, it's this: when that figurative boy comes to watch *his King Kong*, crowds *will* line the streets, he *will* have to get up mighty early to get his place, and when he, at last, takes his seat, it *will* be the ultimate.

STONE STREET, WELLINGTON—October 2005. It's 8.30 on a Thursday morning. Peter Jackson is looking for inspiration, when someone sensibly hands him a cup of coffee. Sprawling onto a sofa, he takes a sideways glance at a small, ragged, fur-covered model that from certain angles looks a bit like King Kong. "That's my good luck totem," he explains proudly. "I built it when I was 12 out of wire, foam rubber and my mother's fox-fur stole."

The legacy of that famously abandoned attempt to remake *King Kong* by the junior Jackson can also be found in an Empire State Building made from cardboard boxes and a bed-

sheet transformed into a cyclorama of New York. Sadly, the Plasticine Brontosaurus and Skull Island bed sheet complete with volcanic peak have been lost to posterity.

"He's holding up pretty well," says Jackson, lifting the model for inspection. You wonder whether he is talking about Kong or himself.

At this stage in production things have reached an exhausting but encouraging final phase. "We got to the point, a day or two ago, where things line up for the finishing line," Jackson confirms, careful not to overstate matters; a previous *Empire* interview came back to haunt him when his strained computer staff on *The Return Of The King* xeroxed one particular quote, "Everything is under control," and stuck it on the wall as an ironic mantra. "It's a little bit more straightforward now," their director concludes carefully.

Straightforward, that is, by Peter Jackson's standards, the director who shot for 18 months



Jack Driscoll (Adrien Brody) attempts to protect Ann Darrow (Naomi Watts).

solidly for *The Lord Of The Rings*, thinks nothing of 15-16-hour days, and raised eyebrows by adding six more Fell Beasts to already completed effects shots with just three days to go. "He just keeps on going," marvels Jack Black, who plays a similar if more foolhardy filmmaker in *Kong's* Carl Denham, "even though there's, like, a million things in his head all at once."

Take, for instance, today's "to do" list:

1. Go to edit suite (five minutes).
2. Interview with *Empire* magazine (tbc).
3. Trim up final miniature plates to supply on to Weta Digital (two hours).
4. Go down to post-production (five minutes).
5. Check sound mix, reel four (one hour).
6. Video conference with composer James Newton Howard to update on score (10 minutes).
7. Listen to new compositions (one hour).
8. Back to sound mix (one hour).
9. Go to Weta Digital (five minutes).
10. Check on today's 20 completed shots (one hour).
11. Check on work-in-progress shots (one hour).
12. Check on digital rendering (30 minutes).
13. Return to post-production (five minutes).
14. Check on film grading and colour timing (one hour).
15. Eat something. >>

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IS KING KONG RACIST?

When King Kong first appeared in 1933 it caused a huge stir, not least because many people read it as racist text. Firstly, there was the tribe on the island, a rabid clan of black stereotypes. Secondly, there was Kong himself, seen as a symbol of the primal black man stealing away white women. Does the film still carry this dubious sub-text in 2005? We asked Peter Jackson and Andy Serkis...



JACKSON: "It's an idea if you want it to be an idea. But it's not something that we wanted to get into with our film. We wanted this to be entertainment-based. People often link Kong with racial stuff because his fur is black. A lot of that stuff is sort of silly - he's a gorilla, and gorillas have black fur. In our movie Kong is absolutely a silverback gorilla. As for the tribe, we were very careful to make our race of people on the island feel as authentic as they could. I didn't want to move into cliché. The racial thing is a potential hot potato, and something we have tried not to emphasise at all. It is one of those sticky things - you can't really do *King Kong* without having the race of people on the island who want to sacrifice Ann. If you drop that, you may as well not bother doing *Kong*."



SERKIS: "I know that theory, but I don't subscribe to it. It was probably more relevant in 1933, but isn't now. Kong is very much a wild animal, and that is how we played him. There was never a sense of him representing anything other than primal. The only symbol I would attach to him is that of nature, and man's abuse of it."

THE DIRECTOR: CARL DENHAM

Jack Black fills the boots of Robert Armstrong as the hubristic adventurer and filmmaker whose wanderlust kicks off the quest for Kong. For the 36-year-old comedian it offered the chance to go back to his theatrical roots and do some serious acting...

So the phone rings, it's Peter Jackson on the other end saying, "I'm making *King Kong* and I want you" - what goes through your head?

There was a process. I didn't just get the, "Hey, you're the guy." Everybody wants to work with Peter Jackson. It's a pipedream. So, it was very surreal to get that call. I went in thinking, This is not going to happen. We sat down and just talked about life and movies. I had a feeling they were just checking me out to see if I was capable of doing it. I knew it was for Carl Denham.

Peter Jackson said that he saw Carl Denham as "a young Orson Welles" and then immediately thought of you...

It wasn't a totally foreign concept for me, because I had auditioned to play Orson Welles for Tim Robbins when he did *Cradle Will Rock*. So, when I was getting ready for the *Kong* audition, I was like, "Yeah, I can get in touch with the aspects of Orson Welles that they wanted." Like, why did he feel the need to be the greatest filmmaker of all time? What's that about? It's about insecurity. I had that in me.

How far do you push it into comedy?

I just feel like comedy is where I'm gonna gravitate towards anyway, so I didn't really think about that. I know that there are some funny nuggets in there. That's the way I like it.

So, what do you think of the monkey?

There's something about *King Kong* that just resonates with the child inside, where you're like, that's the most powerful creature on the planet. Andy Serkis's performance I am sure will be brilliant, I can't wait to see how he relates with Ann.

Do you get weary of people expecting you to be funny all the time?

Sometimes it's absurd. Like, I'll be going to eat, and I think that's sacred - "You're not really going to interrupt me now, are you?" Or if I'm taking a crap, or if I'm in the middle of lovemaking - that's never happened. But it's just a bummer when people say, "You're Jack Black!" "Yeah, how's it going?" "Do something funny!"

How is the *Tenacious D* movie coming along?

I'm really proud of it. We wrote it. It's our baby. It's our *King Kong*. I'd like to say *King Kong* is my *Godfather* and *Tenacious D* in *The Pick Of Destiny* is my...

Last Tango In Paris?

[Laughing] Yeah, it's my *Last Tango In Paris*.

KING KONG

"Up until last week we were still cutting the movie," laughs Jackson, as if apologising for some imperceptible slacking off. "That process was a bit more intense."

The news of a finalised or "locked" cut has been satisfying for everyone. What came as a surprise, not least to Jackson, was that the powers at Universal adored his three-hour work-in-progress. Following a screening, one particular executive came out under the illusion he had only seen a two-hour movie. Given the original film lasts a tender one hour and 40 minutes, how did Jackson's remake swell to Tolkienian lengths?

"I have asked myself the same question," he shrugs. "We actually follow the same structure as the original."

In practical terms, the answer comes in greater time spent on characterisation, building up backstories that were virtually nonexistent in 1933. Ann (Naomi Watts) and Kong's courting period on Skull Island is roomier, the New York section has been expanded, while the big finale atop the Empire State Building will soar to the heavens. Just the battle between Kong and the *T. rex* – make that three *T. rexes* – is nine minutes long. It's a sequence of such complexity it's taken the length of the entire production to create.

"It is this sort of flight path through the island," Jackson enthuses, explaining how it will cross tracts of terrain devised by the conceptual artists: forest, chasms, vines, swamps, weird statues and stone shelves. "It keeps moving all the time. Kong and the dinosaurs end up tangled in these vines, swinging out over the chasm like a pendulum. Ann gets away and Kong is fighting his way through the vines to get to her. It's about 300 shots long."

Ultimately, the film felt better longer. And his studio was blown away: "This is a three-hour feast of an event... I've never come close to seeing an artist working at this level," gasped Universal vice-president Marc Shmuger.

As closely as the film follows the path set down 72 years previously, it has developed a feel entirely its own, a uniqueness Jackson sees as inevitable. "It was a different time – how do you hope to have a movie that feels the same? But I am surprised how our one feels. We haven't compromised Kong, turned him into Mighty Joe Young. He's a brutal, wild gorilla, there is an unpredictability and edge to him. He can be enormously empathetic to Ann in one scene and attack and kill sailors in the next, characters that we know. I like the complexity of it, I like the fact we have presented Kong as we have."

It is a confidence hard won. Although admittedly easier than *Rings* – Universal has left Jackson well enough alone in deepest Wellington after the \$150 million (now \$207 million with the extended running time) budget was set – they've become snagged on symbolic vines. During production, 21kg of scaffolding broke free onto two construction workers. It wasn't overly serious, but the director was criticised over safety standards. "New Zealanders need to stop viewing Peter Jackson through rose-tinted spectacles," commented local union head Ross Wilson. A subsequent official investigation, with Jackson's



Kong unleashes some simian justice. And that's just got to hurt.

"HE'S A BRUTAL, WILD GORILLA. THERE IS AN UNPREDICTABILITY AND EDGE TO HIM. I LIKE THE COMPLEXITY OF IT." PETER JACKSON

full co-operation, revealed satisfaction with all safety levels.

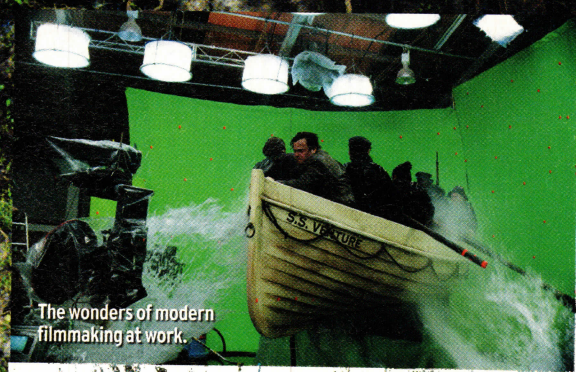
The teaser trailer, released in June, was met with ambivalence, whereas overcome fans had to be carried out of cinemas at the merest hint of Frodo's toenails. The CGI shots looked incomplete and unconvincing, Kong himself more cuddly toy than primal force of nature. Jackson riposted, claiming they were "first passes". But the ground swell had begun with a relative whimper, and the ghost of Rick Baker clambering up the World Trade Centre reared its ungainly head.

"Immediately after the teaser we went back in and did another round of work on him," says Jackson, keen to iterate the look of Kong has been a process of evolution, just as it had been for Gollum with Andy Serkis, again, capturing him heart and soul for the computer. "He had this kind of snaggle tooth which sticks out, we took that down in scale. We did a lot more work ageing him, giving him a lot more scars, and narrowing his face down slightly."

Above all, he was way too fluffy, so they've really dirtied him up with matted hair and an epidermis of mud and detritus, all in keeping with Weta Workshop head Richard Taylor's apt description of him as a "psychotic and lonely hobo".

The biggest shock was to come this October when Jackson announced that he and composer Howard Shore were to part company on the project. This, after a collaboration on *Rings* that spoke as much of friendship as a professional partnership. "It is absolutely a horrible thing," admits Jackson. "There isn't anything good about a time like that. It either clicks or it doesn't click. And especially with music, if it doesn't it can be negative for the film. This wasn't a project that was inspiring him to find the music. It became a common consent. These are the real things that are a bummer with being a filmmaker."

It's something De Laurentiis could have mentioned to that young man: when you get to the top the view is great, but the path gets far more slippery.



The wonders of modern filmmaking at work.



SKULL ISLAND – November 2004. It's 8 o'clock on a Friday evening, nightfall. Ann Darrow – that is, Naomi Watts – is being dragged by her elbows by two hefty warriors through a crowd of their frenzied tribespeople, all the while being drenched in freezing rain. A Steadicam, the only thing granted a waterproof coat, backs away before her as a hypnotic drumbeat booms through unseen speakers, giving the scene a ready terror like a mad, alien rave. “*Konga! Konga!*” rises the chant.

The scene is vividly real, something to which Watts's bruises will attest the next day. “By the time they had got me to my knees, I'd lost all my energy,” says the 37-year-old actress. “Whatever was happening was *real*.”

It's something the Elves and Orcs of Middle-Earth taught Jackson – if every aspect of the film was to resonate for the watcher they must feel authentic; fantasy ruled by reality. “Apart from all the experiential elements, that was the fundamental thing we learned,” he explains, reluctantly peeling himself away from his crew. “Keep it as real as possible. It is a mantra we continued for *Kong*.”

This isn't just a matter of weathered hides and matted pelts, it's an ethos that filters through every stratum of the production. The current set, the giant wall that hems in the great gorilla, is designed with teases of Aztec and Mayan cultures, an ancient world that has been extinguished and then occupied by this new tribe who worship the beast. God may dwell in the details, but he occasionally has to make room for >>

LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE APE!

Andy Serkis tells us how playing Kong taught him to get in touch with his inner gorilla...

“Gorillas are 97 per cent genetically similar to human beings. They're idiosyncratic, like us. They have their own personality. They have patterns of behaviour. You have to match that with the character of Kong. Gorillas are peaceful if they are not attacked. Once they are attacked they are very violent – extremely violent! But they attack because they are defending. All gorillas' emotions are contained in their eyes, although their faces are pretty passive. It's very much like human behaviour, you can read when a gorilla's pissed off, angry, sad, fed up. I was wearing 132 facial sensors in motion capture, which we did for two months.

This was important because Peter hasn't made a monster movie, he's made a character-driven story. It's a story of love, loneliness and maleness in different guises. Kong is basically the last of his species. He knows once he dies, that's it. So the drive to find a mate is unbelievably powerful. That comes out in a frustrated aggression. When they sacrifice the brides, he connects that they are female and he is male. He rips them apart, limb from limb, because he can't mate with them.

On-set it was really just about creating him in the eyes of Naomi. One of the main things was the ‘Konga line’, this sound system which lowered the pitch of my voice, then relayed it through these huge loud-speakers – all the breath, all the grunting and roaring. It sounded pretty impressive. For the eye-line I would be up on cranes and ladders in my Kong muscle suit. Then we'd use a lot of music to create the mood. It was really about finding the connection between them. Sometimes I would call out stage directions: ‘Right, Kong's coming over and he's SMASHING!’ All through the loud-speakers!

Kong was more difficult than Gollum, in a way, because he was dialogue-based, he was humanoid and the very same size as me, but I really didn't treat playing Kong differently from another role. Now I can say, ‘I have played King Kong!’ It's not bad, eh? Iago, Othello... King Kong!”



THE WRITER: JACK DRISCOLL

Following in the footsteps of B-movie beefcake Bruce Cabot, Adrien Brody plays Ann Darrow's shipboard suitor. Far from the “*aww shucks*” lunk of the original, Brody's Driscoll is a soulful playwright along for the ride who is spurred into action when Ann gets caught up in some serious monkey business...

How familiar with the original *King Kong* were you when you signed on?

I made myself familiar. I think it's a great film, way ahead of its time, even down to the Max Steiner score. I watched it and made notes on what I would and wouldn't do. I mentioned the love story to Peter and Fran. I said, “If I'm going to go running off into the jungle, it has to be for the love of my life.” I felt there had to be moments between Jack and Ann where you see their love blossom, which there aren't in the original.

What's your relationship to Kong?

Well, I'm the leading man, but he's the star of the show. Plus he's after my girl, and he's stiff competition. But I felt it had to be more than pure rivalry; I had to admire him in a sense. I have to be fearful for my life, but there had to be a level of respect. I imagined Jack feeling for Kong's torment, understanding his yearning for Ann because he has it too.

It's a bizarre love triangle.

Oh yeah, very bizarre. It gets hairy [laughs].

Jack Black's character, Carl Denham, is loosely based on the young Orson Welles. Is Jack Driscoll modelled on anyone?

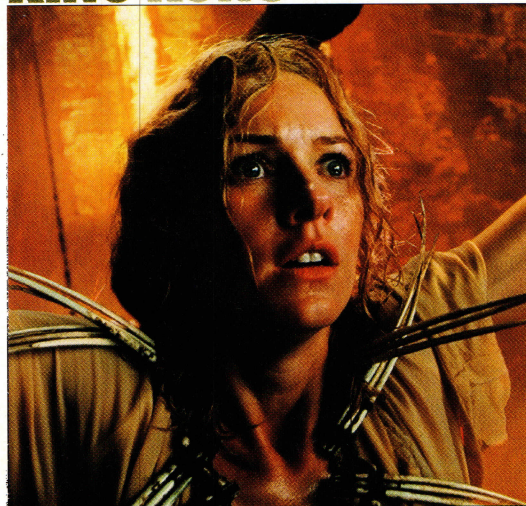
There are elements of Eugene O'Neill, mainly from my reading about O'Neill's travels and adventures. It's interesting, because Jack Driscoll in the original was drawn from a character in one of O'Neill's plays. It was just a bizarre coincidence that Peter and Fran made their Driscoll a playwright and mentioned Eugene O'Neill to me.

Kong could hardly be more different from *The Piano* or *The Jacket*. Did you enjoy the break from heavy drama?

Yeah, it was refreshing to come home physically sore as opposed to emotionally burnt. It's exciting to do full-on stunts. I got to do some stunt driving in New York, escaping from Kong in a taxicab. Peter knew I was very enthusiastic about driving, so he put five cameras on the car and just let me go crazy. It's far less easy to play around when you're portraying a Holocaust survivor.

How did you cope with acting opposite Andy Serkis capering around in a leotard?

Sometimes it felt pretty absurd. But there was no time to play around so you had to be focused. And you can't “show” you're afraid, you actually have to be afraid of something, which is difficult when there's nothing really there. But you have to condition yourself; that's acting.



THE ACTRESS: ANN DARROW

Naomi Watts reinterprets the role immortalised by Fay Wray, the greatest scream queen of them all. A down-and-out actress, Ann sets sail for Skull Island with nothing to lose. Little does she know she has a date with a tall, dark leading man – and he ain't Cary Grant...

The story of *King Kong* is basically a love triangle. What's your relationship with the big fella? It's a lot more tender than in the original or the '76 remake, a lot more loving. Ann and Kong are kindred spirits: they've known loneliness, endured hard times and survived. It occurred to me that although it's very different to anything I've done before, there are parallels. The relationship thing never becomes boring to me, I'm always fascinated with how people connect, why they connect, and what damage they do to each other.

Your role calls for some heavy-duty screaming. Was that something you had to work on?

I screamed quite a bit in *The Ring* and *Mulholland Drive*. I'm a pretty good screamer. In fact, I was doing a TV show in Australia and they asked me to demonstrate. I was on the balcony of my hotel, I screamed and the glass door behind me shattered.

Can you describe re-creating the iconic Empire State Building finale?

I was very, very nervous. Before we started filming, we had a special guide take us up there – Peter actually went right up to the spire. It was a really windy day and I'm not very good with heights, but it was a great experience because once we got onto the New Zealand set with the green screen, I had a real sense of what it was like to actually be there. In fact, that was when I was in New York to meet Fay Wray.

What was that like?

She didn't talk too much; I thought perhaps she didn't want to discuss it. But she was very lucid; every so often she'd pipe up with some quip or other. Peter did most of the talking, it was a very emotional experience for him because he saw the film when he was nine years old and fell in love with it. That's when he decided he was going to be a filmmaker. And, of course, he had a schoolboy crush on Fay, so he did get a little teary.

What did she say to you?

At one point she said, "No, you're not Ann Darrow. I'm Ann Darrow." I thought, Oh no, she doesn't want me to play Ann. Then at the end of the night she gave me a big hug and a kiss. She gave me her blessing. That was a wonderful moment.

"IT IS STRANGE WHEN SOMETHING MEANS SO MUCH TO YOU PERSONALLY. I FELT THE WEIGHT OF IT." PETER JACKSON

Peter Jackson. "Such things are never explained in the film," says the director. "But to us it has been believable."

This is more than just a geek's fascination with arcana; it borders on a Kubrickian immersion. On *Heavenly Creatures*, set in the 1950s, he was determined to get the colour of a character's house correct, but the only photos were in black and white. So, he flew down to the old site of the house in Christchurch, rummaged around in a nearby woodpile and came out with a wooden shingle with traces of green paint on it. You can't expect *Kong* just to monkey around. No, sir.

"We've been building artificial trees," boasts Taylor of the intricacy of the model-work. "Peter wants wind blowing across the island. We've had to physically articulate every branch of every miniature tree."

Take New York, the setting for one of the most iconic moments in film history in 1933 and one of the least in 1976. The pressure is on for 2005. Apart from ground floor sets for the actors, Manhattan has been built entirely in the computer using original photos and archive blueprints. It took six months. The population, created by the MASSIVE program used to conjure Orc hordes in the *Rings* trilogy, will feature exactly the right ethnic mix. Look out too for Model A Fords and typically *Noo Yawk*-style attitudes.

"It was fun to recreate Times Square," adds Jackson. "We studied all the old pictures. It was as gaudy as it is now. They had a fantastic Pepsidin Toothpaste sign with a fully working swing that we were able to re-create. I wanted to make sure all the signage was exactly as it was in 1933, so we had to get permission to use all these different brands: Chevrolet, Pepsidin, Coca-

Cola."

What the CG New York has allowed the director is total camera freedom when it comes to the famous biplane attack. His camera can literally loop and plunge, *Rings*-style, about the famous city. Jackson knew his remake lived or fell to its death on how well he pulled off this vital sequence, so had his troops working on it before a word of the new script had been written. "It's a difficult scene to do, psychologically," he explains. "It is the reason to remake *Kong* in a lot of ways – being the guy who gets to redo that particular sequence. It is strange when something means so much to you personally, that has had this huge impact on your life and career. I felt the weight of it."

On-set, Jackson seems more in his element than amongst the demands of post-production. Those "bummer" aspects of his trade are a long way off. For now, the six-month shoot is slipping by without a judder. His cast are having a ball: Watts, Black, Serkis, Adrien Brody, Jamie Bell and *The Pianist*'s Thomas Kretschmann amongst them, most of whom had never been to New Zealand before. Or is that Middle-Earth? "Whenever family comes to visit," sniggers Black, "I take them over to the Weta Workshop and give them the tour and take pictures of Gollum."

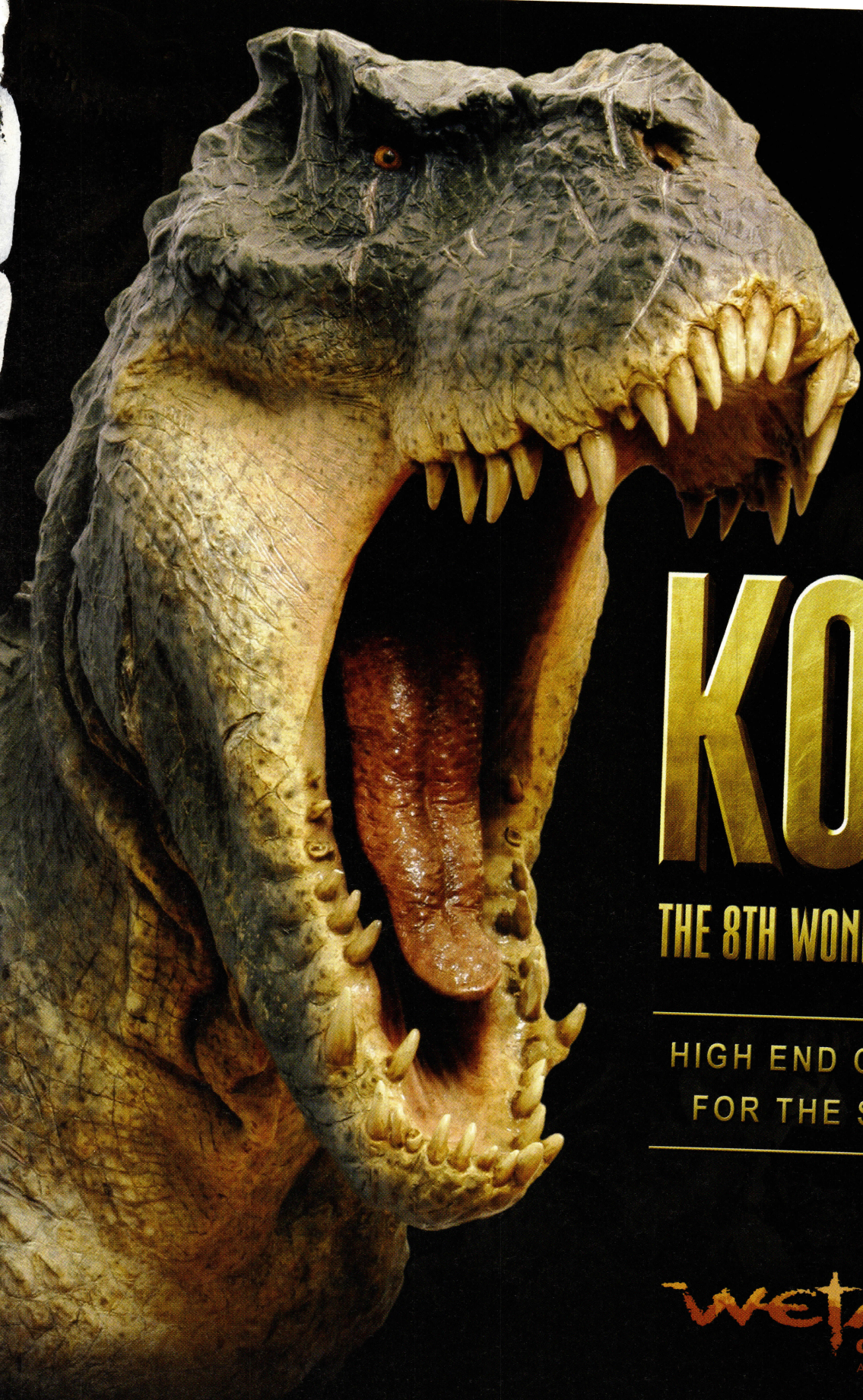
With, perhaps, less surfing, bonding and tattooing going on, *Kong*'s troupe of actors are >>



Naomi Watts. And a cuddly green thing.



Where's Kong when you need him? Ann Darrow attracts some unwanted attention.



KONG

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SEE THE MOVIE



KING KONG



THE CABIN BOY: JIMMY

The 19-year-old boy from Billingham danced his way to a BAFTA in 2000's *Billy Elliot*, and here he plays the street smart, quick-witted Jimmy, a kid whose very existence revolves around the explorers' ship. He thinks life couldn't be more exciting... until the search for Kong begins.

Have you watched the original *King Kong*?

Yes, of course... It's a classic story and an iconic movie. It's got a bit dated, obviously, but for the time the technology was pretty brilliant. Peter's stuck very closely to the '33 version using the same characters and structure.

Have you seen the big ape yet?

I've only seen a little bit - about five minutes of completed footage. It looks pretty amazing - I think Peter's really excited about it.

What was it like working with Mr Jackson?

Fantastic. You go into it thinking it may be very technical, but he has an amazing capability for putting all that to one side and focusing on your performance. He'll give you very direct notes and is very good on the dramatic side. Plus he really pulled out all the toys, it's ridiculous: huge cranes, mechanical rowing boats, wave machines, amazing hand-built sets.

Were you a fan of the *Rings* movies?

Of course. Absolutely, I think *Two Towers* is my favourite - it was a very complete movie. Sequels aren't always good, but he really figured it out.

Do you prefer working on big-budget blockbusters or small indies?

The thing with *King Kong* is we were shooting in New Zealand, so we weren't anywhere near LA, Universal Studios, any execs... You really didn't get the sense you were working on a big Hollywood blockbuster. You got more of a sense that you were working on the biggest independent movie of all time.

How did you like New Zealand?

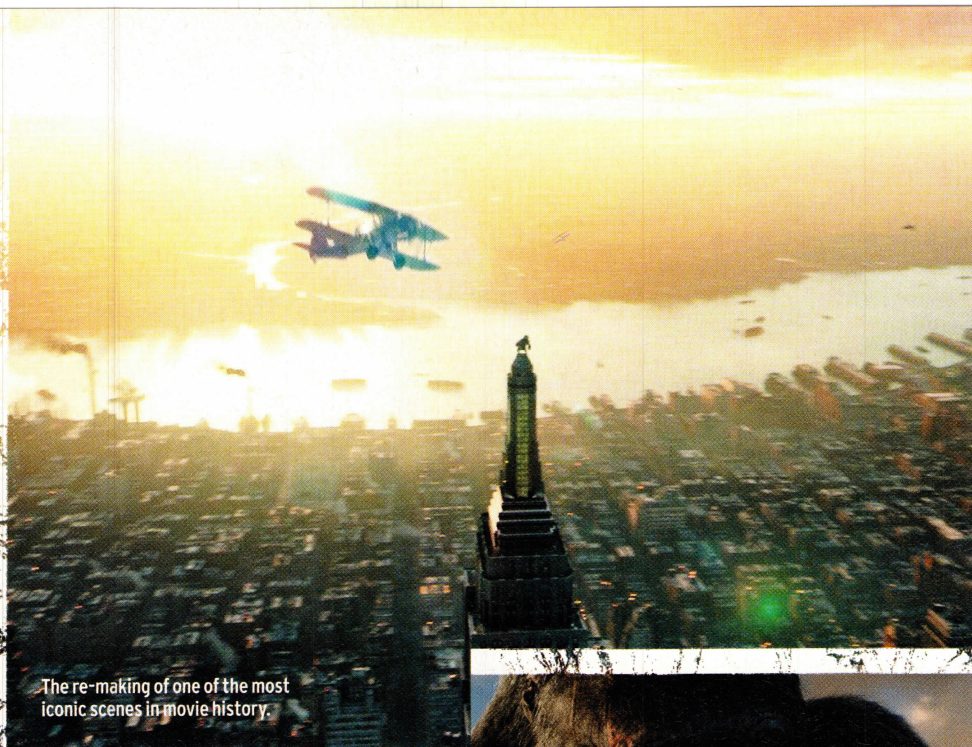
It was interesting, because it was the furthest away from home I'd ever been. It's in the Southern Hemisphere, it's in a different time zone, the water goes down the plug-hole a different way. So many things are not like home.

How do you feel about your career?

If I look on my résumé at the people I've been working with for the last two years, I'm pretty proud and pleased. It could have gone completely pear-shaped.

Do you still dance?

Not as often as I'd like to. I took some tap classes when I was in New York recently, and that was the first time I put the shoes on for a long time. It's always a burning passion inside of me.



The re-making of one of the most iconic scenes in movie history.

having their own Kiwi experience. It stems not only from the country's welcoming nature, but their director's determined ethos that making films should be an adventure.

"I don't think it is just about New Zealand," laughs Jackson, not quite prepared to take up the mantle of tour guide. "I think it is partly the way the set is run. The way that we are very inclusive."

"Peter Jackson was the biggest draw," asserts Watts. "He is so mindful of your interpretation and willing to integrate it with his."

Along with co-producers and screenwriters Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, Jackson likes to involve actors in the development of the script. As the director puts it, they actually rely on the actors to represent their characters at meetings, to fight the cause of their Jack Driscoll, Carl Denham, Ann Darrow or Lumpy The Cook. This last peculiar fellow is played by Andy Serkis in the flesh - he's the ship's cook who makes up in versatility for what he lacks in tastebuds, being the ship's barber, tattooist and chief medical officer to boot. "He gets his own confrontation with Kong," laughs Serkis. "That means I share the screen with myself."

Equal diligence has been applied to character nuance as wind-flexible trees and Pepsidin hoardings. Black's Carl Denham is partly based on the exuberances of a young Orson Welles, as well as expeditionary filmmakers of the 1930s who sought out forgotten tribes with a mixture of the *National Geographic* and pure exploitation. Watts's Ann Darrow, while given a modern overhaul by the exigencies of Walsh and Boyens, references Fay Wray herself. Jackson, Walsh and Watts had a chance to meet *Kong*'s original paramour before she died.

"It is the one thing that I will be eternally grateful for," he says of their Manhattan meeting, where Wray not only granted her approval for his remake, but also helped Watts grasp the realities of life as an actress in 1933. "Fay told us there was no make-up department, the actors would do it themselves. She decided she wanted to be



"Look into the eyes, the eyes, not around the eyes..."

blonde for Kong, so she went out and bought a blonde wig, paid for it herself. I know Naomi took a lot of that into her role and I recognise bits of Fay, little gestures and mannerisms."

THE KODAK THEATRE, LOS ANGELES - February 2004.

It's 8 o'clock on a Sunday evening when Peter Jackson strolls off the stage holding an Oscar, one of 11 accorded *The Return Of The King*. It is Steven Spielberg, his presenter, who guides him through the backstage area.

"He said to me, 'Listen, I've done this, my advice is to soak it in, you'll forget it very easily,'" recalls Jackson from the safety of his Wellington sofa in 2005. "I know what he means, because it has all become a blur." If the young Spielberg had hailed from New Zealand in 1976, they could have shared a bucket of popcorn.

How about if Cooper and Schoedsack were available for comment, the two men who changed the world back in 1933? What would he ask of them?

"I would want to ask them if they would want to see my movie," he says with a sly smile. "I would want to ask them what they thought of it. That is the thing you can't help but be intrigued by."

There is, finally, only one thing that matters to all these directors - to get it right, to get the film right. To please all those 14-year-olds who stare longingly through the glass at an empty theatre. To be the ultimate.

>> King Kong is released on December 14 and is previewed on page 30. Keep an eye on www.empireonline.com.au for a full review.